



*Anyone who talks about you...or your business...is media!*

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# ***Tackling Those Tough Questions***

***How to handle the media's most  
common and trickiest questions  
and look good doing it!***



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## ***Getting Comfortable With Uncomfortable Questions***

Let's give reporters the benefit of the doubt. In most interview situations, most of the questions you receive will be straightforward attempts to understand you, your organization and your story. But there can be times when the questioning becomes negative, even malicious. That's when you need both tact and skill to remain cool and unflustered while you find opportunities to reach out to your audience with the messages important to your organization.

### ***Think of Your Taxes***

It may help to think of answers to these "tricky" questions in the same way you think about your taxes. Avoiding unnecessary taxes is not only legal, but is encouraged by any realistic financial planner. Evading taxes that you legitimately owe, however, is illegal.

Never evade questions. If the answer is unpleasant, but necessary, you'll always be better off by dealing with it sooner than later. But you should always avoid answering questions that are unnecessary, outside the scope of the interview, irrelevant and pointedly negative. Rather than

“buying into” these questions or the way they are asked you should pose your answers in a way that communicates one or more of the messages your audience needs to hear.

## ***Seven Basic Forms***

Tough questions can take many forms. Often, several forms can be combined into a single question, making the process of answering even trickier.

We’ve identified the seven basic forms of difficult questions often posed in media interviews. These are based on numerous interviews we have either conducted or given.

On the following pages you’ll find descriptions of these difficult interview questions, along with an analysis of just what makes them difficult to answer. You’ll also find clear, direct, easy-to-learn and easy-to-use guidelines for handling each of the seven categories of difficult questions.

## ***Realistic Expectations***

One final thought before we begin: Minimizing damage to your organization is a legitimate goal, but expert handling of difficult questions will not turn a bad situation into good one.

So, be realistic in your expectations about the outcome of any interview. Guidelines for handling difficult interview questions are not intended to help an organization gloss over bad behavior or whitewash a negative situation. If your organization has made mistakes that now have become public, your best course is to publicly own up to your actions.

### ***The Built-In Premise***

Questions with a built-in premise are probably the most well-known among the tough questions reporters may pose. It's cliché, but the time-honored "Are you still beating your spouse?" question remains the best example. For the unprepared or untrained interview subject, this can be the trickiest of all the tough questions because there appears to be no way to answer without condemning yourself.

Consider how this question is constructed. Typically, it has two parts: First is the premise, an assumption that may be true or false, positive or negative; Second, is the actual question, which usually is stated as a close-ended interrogative (it seems to require that you answer with either "yes" or "no.")

This structure requires that you do a great deal of mental processing before responding. You must: 1) Identify the premise; 2) Determine if it is true or false, positive or negative; 3) Search your mental data banks for the key message most closely associated with this assumption; and 4) Overcome the natural inclination to blurt out a "yes" or "no" answer. And this must all happen in the few seconds before your mouth starts moving with your response.

## **How To Handle It**

This question type may be complex, but the technique for answering it is simple. Begin with the assumption that you are never required to accept any premise offered as part of a question, especially a question that is closed-ended. Then, disregard the reporter's premise and respond by stating one of your key messages.

Novice interviewees often complain that this technique makes them appear (or at least feel) evasive, especially if the premise they just avoided is true. By using this technique you are, in fact, avoiding the question as stated. If you judge that a question has a premise or is unfair in some way, then you have no obligation to respond to the question in that form. That's not being evasive.

Disregarding a false premise may seem easier. But even if the premise is true, you are under no requirement to “buy into” any question as it is posed. You always have the right to answer any question in a way that will best represent you and your organization.

**Example Question:** Since your competition has out-flanked you with lower prices, how are you compensating for the lost business?

**Suggested Answer:** Value is almost always the highest priority for our customers. That’s what they tell us and it is our policy and practice to give them exactly what they want. It is value and customer service that builds loyalty, and the backbone of our success.

## ***The Pregnant Pause***

You may be a victim of the pregnant pause without ever being interviewed by the media. Bosses sometimes use it to get information from subordinate employees. Even family members may attempt to play on your need to fill dead space in a conversation.

Here’s the scenario for the pregnant pause: You’re answering questions in an interview. You finish one answer, but the interviewer remains silent. Literally within seconds you may become uncomfortable with the silence. You begin to feel that maybe you were unresponsive with your answer.

Depending on the interview situation (a live interview, or even a telephone conversation, for example) the tension can become unbearable, and you start talking again before any further questions are asked. That's when you're in the greatest danger of stating information you otherwise never would have offered.

The pregnant pause attempts to play on guilt. Even the most innocent person may succumb to feelings of guilt when they are in an unfamiliar, uncomfortable situation and the tension grows. When the reporter remains silent after your answer, you are expected to begin feeling guilty about not being responsive, or perhaps about not giving as much information as the reporter wanted.

## **How To Handle It**

Your responsibility is to be responsive to the information needs of your audience and to your organization, not to the reporter. Accomplishing that is easiest when you learn to relax in an interview, to present a pleasant, sincere smile, and keep your mouth closed when your answer is complete to your own satisfaction.

Two things will always defeat the pregnant pause:

- 1) a firm resolve to say no more no matter how



long the silence lasts; and 2) a pleasant smile indicating your level of satisfaction with your answer.

Easy to say; maybe a little tougher to do. But there are ways. First, anticipate that this might happen and resolve that you won't be baited by silence into making undisciplined statements. Second, become as familiar as possible with the interview environment before you begin. Learn about a TV studio beforehand, if that's where your interview will be. Accustom yourself to bright lights in your eyes if you expect to do a television interview in a setting as familiar, even, as your own office. Just don't allow yourself to be intimidated by unfamiliar surroundings or intrusive equipment.

Why does remaining silent always work? If your interview is live, the interviewer must maintain a certain pace, or risk appearing to lose control of the interview. If the interview is taped, the pause will most likely be edited out. Even if you are alone with a reporter who is only taking handwritten notes, that person will be willing to wait only so long before moving on to a new question.

## ***Multiple Questions***

*How many were there? Where did they come from? What did they look like? What did you do next? Shouldn't you have done this? Why didn't you do that?*

Getting hit with multiple questions can feel a bit like enduring verbal machine-gun fire. Actually, that's the point. A reporter may feel that he or she can rattle your question-answering discipline (and maybe get a juicy quote) by subjecting you to such a barrage.

For the uninitiated interview subject, it can even work. By trying to answer all the questions at once, you don't really answer any of them well.

### **How To Handle It**

You can never answer more than one question at a time, right? So don't try. And don't let the rapid-fire fluster you. Wait patiently while the reporter rattles off the list of questions. If you're really listening, most likely one of the questions will provide you an opportunity to make one of your key points. Now, pick that question and answer it.

And don't feel as if you have to keep track of the other questions. There is a division of labor for any interview. You are the one being interviewed. You are responsible for answers. The reporter is responsible for questions. When you've given the answer to the question you like, stop and wait for the next question. If another barrage follows, just follow the steps described above.

Disciplining yourself to use this technique has many advantages. You remain focused on your key messages and the opportunities to deliver them. You maintain a level of control in the interview. Your restraint and self-control gain you important credibility points with your audience.

**Example Questions:** What will you do when the next EPA report comes out? How will you justify being the biggest polluter in the state? How are you going to handle angry stockholders when they hear about it? How have you managed to *hide* these facts for so long?

**Example Answer:** We have always worked closely with the EPA and either met or exceeded their requirements. What is new here is that our industry is now included in this annual report, and you will see that our emissions are under control and present no danger to anyone.

## ***The Interrupted Answer***

You're giving what you feel is a good answer to the question just posed. But before you're finished you realize the reporter is talking over you, pushing for the answer to yet another question. Your face may begin to flush as your frustration

grows. The feeling is exactly the same as when that racy little sports car cut you off on the Interstate the other day. Don't you just hate that!

Reporters may interrupt your answer for any number of reasons. Maybe your interviewer's deadline is growing near. Maybe he or she wants to change the direction of the interview. Maybe the reporter is just in a hurry to go to lunch. Or maybe. . .just maybe. . .the goal is to get you off track, to make you say things you don't want to say.

Being rudely interrupted is irritating to most people. We're simply not accustomed to it in polite society. Reporters, however, are usually more interested in getting a "good story" than with appearing polite. So they may use this rude approach like shaking a tree to make the good apples fall. But you and the reporter may disagree about which are the "good apples."

## **How To Handle It**

Responding to the interrupted answer is much like responding to the multiple question ploy. The key is to avoid becoming flustered, frustrated or, worse yet, angry at the reporter. When any of those things happen, it means you've lost your measure of control over the interview. Your

emotions have taken over, and your emotional self will never perform as well in an interview as your rational self, especially if the emotions are frustration and anger.

If a reporter interrupts your answer to a question don't try to talk over him or her. That will merely escalate the interview into a confrontation (an especially bad technique if you are on camera). Instead of competing with the reporter, simply give up the floor until he or she is done. Then, while maintaining your composure say: *"I'll be happy to respond to that in a moment, but you've asked me a very important question. I want to make certain that I give you a complete answer."* Then complete your answer to the original question. (And don't wait for permission to continue, plunge ahead.)

When you've finally finished your answer, don't feel responsible for remembering the question you were interrupted with. That's not your job. If it's important to the reporter, he or she will remember it.

## ***Negative Questions***

In a way, all of the above questioning techniques are negative. Each uses some form of aggressive technique to “rattle” you by either posing an unacceptable premise or by using verbal intimidation.

Beyond these examples, however, are the truly negative questions, the ones that imply something bad about you or your organization. They may not contain a premise, and they may not require a “yes” or “no” answer, but they are stated so negatively that the intent is clear.

Negative questions may often be identified by their introductions: “Isn’t it true that. . .?” “Aren’t you concerned that. . .” “Wouldn’t you rather. . .” You may have heard these so frequently you don’t realize it, but every contraction used in these introductions is a negative statement. (Is it not true? Are you not concerned? Would not you rather. . .?)

A negative question is a verbal slap in the face. Often, it is designed to intimidate, and, therefore, to elicit an answer that is poorly thought out.

## **How To Handle It**

First, train yourself to recognize the typical introductions to negative questions. With just a little bit of practice, “Isn’t it true that. . .?” will quickly become a red flag for you. But instead of being a red flag that incites anger, think of it as a warning to help you carefully steer around a rocky spot in the road.

Next, train yourself to avoid beginning the answers to any question with “Yes” or “No.” Remember, from the reporter’s point of view, your reason for doing the interview is less about providing the answers to specific questions than it is about getting good quotes or a good sound bite on tape (audio or video). When you begin your answer with either of these words, you’re more focused on the question than on your messages. Besides, a “No” answer most often sounds like a denial. Except in rare cases, you are much better served by a clear, direct, positive statement than with a denial.

Also, avoid repeating the question (especially a negative question) in your answer.

## **Negative Question With A Weak Response:**

Q. Isn't it true that you're closing down all of your operations in this state, leaving 1,200 people without jobs?

A. Yes, we are closing down all of our operations in this state and firing 1,200 people.

We tend to take this approach because it gives us a few seconds more to think about the answer. But restating the question only restates the negative point or accepts the assumption that may be built into the question. Don't be baited into this too-easy response. Instead, be sensitive to the content of the question, but make a positive statement built on your interview objective or one of your main points, whichever is most appropriate for the situation.

## **Negative Question With A Strong Response**

Q. Isn't it true that you're closing down all of your operations in this state, leaving 1,200 people without jobs?

A. Our customer base has changed significantly in recent years, and we have seen five consecutive quarters without



profit from these operations. That leaves XYZ Corporation with no choice but to cease operations here. Unfortunately, we will have to dismiss 1,200 employees.”  
(Answers the question directly and honestly, but not without stating one or more key messages.)

Here’s another important tip. Avoid the temptation to use phrases such as “tell our side of the story” or “get our messages out.” Using these phrases makes you appear (or sound) confrontational and adversarial. Even if the situation you are dealing with is confrontational and adversarial, you don’t gain anything by fanning the flames during media interviews.

If you can present yourself and your organization as being focused on resolving the issue at hand, solving a problem or improving a situation, you will gain respect and credibility among your audiences.

Remember, it is always possible to support your own position without condemning or denigrating another. Your interview goal is to find a way to verbally get to an answer that you WANT to give.

## ***Third-Party Questions***

*A recent report concludes that 75% of your products are defective and dangerous. How do you respond to that?*

*According to a spokesman for the union, your company has failed to provide pay increases in the last five years. Isn't that a long time to go without a raise?*

Hold the phone! You've just been handed a third-party question. Third-party questions are similar to negative questions and those with a built-in premise because the basis of the question is an assumption or an accusation. It's just attributed to someone else, and you're invited to respond. What's even worse is this approach often strongly implies that not answering the question just the way it is stated implies you are hiding something.

Be careful here. Be VERY careful here. When you receive a third-party question, you can never assume the information reported is accurate. Information transmitted by a "middle man" is always suspect because it can easily be misunderstood or misinterpreted. Perhaps the reporter has accurately quoted the report or the

union spokesperson. But how would you know? So why risk responding to it?

## **How To Handle It**

Fortunately, the “third-party” element in such a question is usually obvious. Even in the tense, unfamiliar circumstances of an interview, you should be able to recognize this tactic with little difficulty. When you receive such a question, apply the same rules you learned for dealing with the negative question and the built-in premise. Disregard them and use your most closely related message.

In some cases, it may be important to clarify why you are waving the reporter’s question aside. Here are some examples:

### **Product Safety Question**

A: You’re quoting a report we have yet to see. We’ll want to review that immediately. Meanwhile, here are the steps we use at XYZ Corporation to ensure product safety.

A: We have that report, and our safety engineers are reviewing each product listed there. Meanwhile, here are. . . .

### **Union Accusation Question**

A: We would have to hear directly from the union bargaining committee on that issue.

Pay increases for members of the bargaining unit are spelled out clearly in the union contract. . . .

A: Our plant manager and the president of the local union have discussed that issue. Pay increases. . . .

## ***The Speculative Question***

Can you predict the future? Can you make a factual statement about how some event will turn out, or would have turned out if something were different? Can you comment on what someone will do if this or that happens?

Of course you can't! And when talking with the news media, you want to be careful not to try.

These are the speculative questions. They're the favorites of many reporters. Seldom does an interviewer fail to pose some type of speculative question. And in the event of a crisis, you can expect speculative questions to come thick and fast.

Speculative questions aren't always intended to trap you into making unwanted statements. Often, they are the result of a reporter who is uninformed about the current situation, who simply doesn't have sufficient information to ask enough

fact-based questions to satisfy his or her need for a fully developed story.

Whatever the origin of the speculation, however, in most cases, you don't want to go there. You may have more information about the subject of the interview, than any other person. But the world has this funny way of making things turn out different than anyone — even you — expected.

## **How To Handle It**

If you are uncomfortable in the interview situation, or uncertain of your messages, your chances of speculating inadvertently increase dramatically. So, a well-rehearsed set of messages is the best preparation for dealing with the speculative question.

Equally important, though, you must learn to *hear* the speculation inside the question. Speculative questions ask you to give information you can not possibly have first-hand. Learning to hear these requires some practice, but you'll soon learn to recognize the phrasing that always signals: SPECULATIVE!

Speculative questions often sound like these:  
How will the vote turn out? What are your chances

of winning this case? Will you reach a settlement before the deadline? What other problems are likely before this products reaches the market?

The most reliable method for answering questions such as these is to make a statement of fact. Tactfully dismiss the speculation, then make a factual statement that supports one of your message points or your key objective. And keep this in mind: Unless your interview is live, your audience is unlikely to hear the question, only your answer. So, when asked to speculate, simply make a fact-based statement your audiences need to hear.

**Example Question:** There is a lot of conjecture that the FDA is going to tell you to take these products off the market. How do you plan to handle that?

**Example Answer:** It would be both unfair and unwise to speculate on the FDA's plans. But, we do know this: our medications have been lauded by the medical community nationwide for their positive results. We're very pleased by those comments and the FDA is very aware of their wide acceptance and success.



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